# the Art of Gardening BUILDING YOUR SOLL Written by Susan Vinskofski Illustrated by Deb Hamby







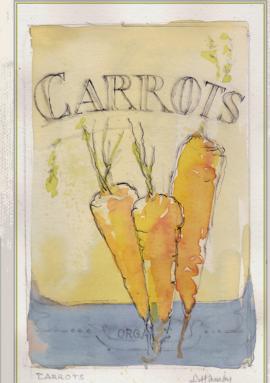








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### The Art of Gardening: Building Your Soil

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As a child, I had a neighbor who grew flowers. When I was eight years old she gave me a Johnny-jump-up, which I planted in the narrow strip of ground between our house and driveway. When the flower faded, I pulled the plant out of the ground. My neighbor scolded me, but I thought that I was caring for my "garden." Thankfully that first negative experience did not deter me. Gardening was, and is, an important part of who I am.

When I was sixteen, I read the book *Postage Stamp Gardening* and proceeded to dig up my family's entire small backyard and plant a garden. I've had a garden ever since. Although I'm primarily self-taught, several years ago I took courses to become a Master Gardener in my PA county. That training spurred me on to become a better gardener.

One of the things I learned as a Master Gardener is to always give research-based answers to the gardening questions I'm asked. And I do. But to me gardening is not only research-based, it's also intuitive and creative. Yes, gardening is an art. An artist requires training to hone her skill. And I love the classes that I continue to take. But at the end of the day, the success of my garden is determined by observing and imagining what my garden could be, knowing my soil and how to build it, and, most of all, spending time enjoying my garden. Rather than getting all technical about it, I just go out there and garden!

This book has been a labor of love and is dedicated to my parents who let me plant that first garden. They weren't gardeners themselves, and they didn't hold my hand. They just let me be creative and do what I wanted to do. For that I'll always be thankful.



It
Begins
with
the
Soil

# CHAPTER 1 It Begins with the Soil

I wouldn't know how to begin a discussion on gardening without beginning with the soil. When I teach a workshop, I ask people what they think of when they think "garden." Most often the answer has to do with the harvest. Of course we wouldn't garden if we couldn't look forward to a bountiful harvest. But I always encourage my students to think "soil" because healthy soil will result in a healthy, nutrient-dense harvest. A garden with poor soil may produce fruit, but that fruit can't possibly contain all the nutrients and flavor as fruit grown in soil that has provided all that is needed for its health. And plants grown in healthy soil have fewer problems with disease and pests.

## Components of Healthy Soil

So what makes soil healthy? Soil is so much more than dirt. One of the

components is weathered rock, from which our garden plants receive many of the minerals they need.
Good soil also contains organic matter—worm castings, decomposed leaves, and even the remains of soil organisms such as insects, fungi, and bacteria. Replenishing organic matter is essential to soil care. We'll talk more about this as we proceed.

Soil also needs air. Without air spaces soil is compacted, and neither roots nor soil organisms will have the space they need to grow and breathe. As earthworms build tunnels they help to aerate the soil. We can prevent compacting our garden soil by never stepping on the area where plants grow, but rather maintaining paths or building raised beds.

And of course plants would not survive without the water in soil, which is used in the processes of photosynthesis and transporting nutrients through the roots and up into the plant.

Finally, the texture of soil—the size of its particles—has a direct effect on how well your garden will grow. Sand is composed of large particles, and water will pass through it quickly. Clay, on the other hand, is made of extremely small particles. It is sticky when wet, has few air spaces, and



drains poorly. I won't spend a lot of time on this because I want to teach you to build a garden in such a way that the original soil you have to work with will not be what determines your end result.